

Historicity

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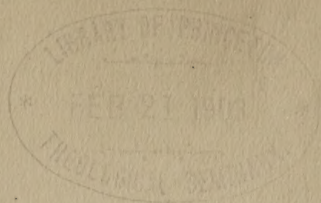
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HISTORICITY.

ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE AUBURN SEMINARY TERM,

SEPTEMBER 17, 1902,

BY PROFESSOR WILLIS J. BEECHER, D. D.

Do the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments ordinarily tell the truth in matters of fact? To change the form of this question, are the writers of the scriptures in the habit of making assertions which they do not know to be true? The question remains nearly the same if we put it in this form: Do the prophets and the apostles and evangelists and Jesus Christ ordinarily tell the truth when they state facts? Are they more or less in the habit of making assertions which they do not know to be true?

At the present time these questions are not merely speculative, but are the statement of actual issues. There are living scholars of high repute who do not teach that statements of fact found in the scriptures are ordinarily to be depended upon; who on the contrary hold that a statement of fact made in the Old or the New Testament has so small a claim to credence that it may be set aside for very slight reasons, or even for the mere lack of being confirmed from other sources. Of the men who affirm that Moses wrote no part of the pentateuch, and David none of the psalms, and the son of Amoz very little of the book of Isaiah, many no longer trouble themselves to prove that their opinions agree with those of the prophets and evangelists and Jesus; they find it easier to say that the prophets and evangelists were in error as to the facts, and that the Lord Jesus was also ignorant of the facts, thanks to his emptying himself, in his incarnation.

This question—whether the scriptures are trustworthy in their statements of fact—is no longer a question for scholars only, but is a matter of popular teaching. The doctrine that they are untrustworthy is now taught in churches and Sunday-schools, is eagerly accepted

The Question
Stated

A Question
Actually
at Issue

A Question
for the People

by people who are prejudiced against old fashioned views, and is causing distress to many whose views are still old fashioned.

During the summer I attended a horse race, and there listened to an oration by a horse-trotting man, ostensibly on a subject connected with the track, but actually an attack upon the veracity of the bible. The man said that on the very first page of the old Book it is affirmed that the horse was made before man, while on the next page it is affirmed that man was made before the horse, and that one statement or the other is therefore a falsehood. He made his assertion humorous by a story of two tramps and a dog. The dog was savagely showing his teeth, and at the same time amicably wagging his tail, and the tramps did not know which end of the dog to believe. The horse-trotting man said that he was in similar doubt concerning the bible. He did not know which of the contradictory assertions to believe.

I discussed this oration with several acquaintances who heard it. Among them were young people who had studied the bible with improved methods in three different colleges. Some of them were sure that the horse-trotting man was wrong in saying that the bible tells untruths; others, inclining to the Modern View, thought him probably correct; but not one of them had any distinct recollection of the biblical statements themselves, as contained in the first two chapters of Genesis.

I am afraid that the incident is typical. Some theological seminaries teach the doctrine that the horse-trotting man taught; and there are intelligent and cultivated people who have opinions concerning the doctrine without knowing much about the facts. Two decades ago most Christian people took sides, often without knowing why, in favor of the old tradition that the scriptures are miraculously truthful. To-day, equally without knowing why, many take sides with the opposite opinion.

So far as its merits are concerned, this question has been neglected—allowed to go by default one way or the other. Nevertheless it is beyond comparison more important than any problem of original documents, or of authorship and date, or of interpretation, or of inspiration, now before scholars. And its importance is the greater for the fact that upon it all these other problems depend.

The problem of the truthfulness of the scriptures to fact is closely connected with that of their literary character—literary character in the true sense of the term, and not in the spurious

At Present
the Greatest
Biblical Question

Historicity
and Literary
Character

sense in which it is so often employed. It is a pity that our generation uses this term so abusively. By "literary study" many mean just the analyzing of the books into their supposed original sources. This is important, precisely as the mineralogical and chemical analysis of marbles is important in the study of masterpieces of sculpture. But proper literary or artistic study consists in something else than such subsidiary processes as these. True literary study is the study of the product, not that of the mechanical processes of production. And as I have just said, the question of truthfulness to fact is bound up with that of literary character.

This paper treats of THE HISTORICITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS: first, of their literary character as bearing on their truthfulness to fact; second, of the doctrine of historicity.

I. First, the relation between historicity and literary character.

Professors of literature tell us that literary statements of fact differ from scientific statements of fact. The ideal of science is to state all the facts in the case and to state them in exact order. The ideal of literature is to make the facts interesting and influential by so stating them that they will appeal to that in us which is human. One result of this difference is that the formulas of science must change as our knowledge of the facts increases; while literature may succeed in making statements of fact that will remain true, without change for thousands of years.

In discussing the historical truthfulness of any biblical narrative, it is indispensable to note that the narrative is literature—not mere stupid unliterary chronicle, and not a scientific report, but a bit of literature, often exquisite in its literary merit, dealing with the facts in a different way from that in which science deals with them, emphasizing especially those aspects of a fact which appeal to our common humanity. If we treat those aspects of the fact as if they were the whole fact, or if we ignore their flavor as appealing to universal humanity, we fail to get their true meaning.

The Bible
is Literature

In this paper we are not dealing with the claims of the bible to be a divine revelation. But we may note in passing that its literary nature is one of its especial elements of fitness as a revelation. For a revelation from God should certainly be so expressed as to appeal to men alike in the more elementary and in the more advanced ages.

Revelation and
Literary
Character

Among the literary characteristics of the biblical narratives, there are two which bear strongly on the question of their truthfulness in matters of fact. First, these narratives give only selected facts, arranged for purposes of religious teaching. What we call biblical history is never a continuous record of events, but always a homiletical presentation of selected events. Second, the narratives are oriental in diction, picturesque, abounding in figures of speech, demanding an alert imagination on the part of one who would understand them.

The narratives in Genesis, for example, differ greatly in literary character; but they have these two marks in common. Supposing them to be narratives of fact, they give only selected facts. Few or none of them make any approach to completeness. In each we have a few statements of fact, a few out of possible thousands or millions, chosen with a view to the teaching of religious lessons. And the statements of fact are given with a play of imagery that demands an alert mind and an awakened fancy on the part of the reader.*

To our neglect of these things are due many of the difficulties that trouble us. We have indolently accepted unliterary traditional interpretations, substituting these for the true meanings, until our power to see the meaning that the authors intended is in a measure atrophied. We are accustomed to think that these authors say things which, really, they do not say; and the things that they really say we too often overlook.

They do not make certain assertions that are often attributed to them. I am afraid it is no caricature to say that many understand the second chapter of Genesis as affirming that Jehovah made an animated mud doll, in a few minutes, and called it man, and afterward made a garden in a few minutes more, and then made more mud dolls, the animals and birds, and set them in a row, and marched the row of them past the man to be named. If you will think a little, you will see that the narrative does not say this. It does not say that the man or the garden or the animals were made in a few minutes or a few hours. It implies the contrary. It calls our

*The first chapter of Genesis is as imaginative and as anthropomorphic as the chapters that follow it, though the types of imaginativeness and of anthropomorphism are as unlike as possible.

attention to a period, necessarily a very long period, when the earth was watered by a perpetual mist, before the rain system began. It says explicitly that God "planted" the garden, thus implying slow processes of growth. It does not say whether the fashioning of man and the animals and the bringing of them together occupied a few seconds or many millenniums. It does not say whether the bringing of them together was by a miraculous slow march, or by the ordinary process of the man meeting the animals in the woods. It does not say which was made first, or whether they were all in process at the same time. The mud pie aspect of the affair is conspicuously absent. The narrative asserts that man and the animals were fashioned from the ground; but it does not tell us whether this was done by a sudden miraculous process or by age-long evolution. We have no indication that John Milton's "tawny lion, pawing to get free" was in the thought of the author of Genesis. We have lazily supposed that these things were in Genesis, but we cannot find them there by looking.

Further, when the Genesis accounts represent deity a swor-
 king six days and resting the seventh, as speaking in sentences, as
 breathing into the man's nostrils, these expres-
 sions are clearly anthropomorphic. They stand
 for realities, but the statements themselves are
 figures of speech, and should never have been mistaken, as some
 of them have been, for statements of fact.

So much for our habit of interpreting facts into the bible.
 We also habitually slight the facts that are really in the bible.

Neglected
 Biblical
 Facts Suppose you take the trouble to say to yourself
 that these chapters probably contain a serious
 meaning, and one worth a grown man's under-
 standing. Not to raise the question of a divine revelation, we
 have here a bit of literature of such vitality that it has survived
 for much more than two millenniums, and still claims the inter-
 ested attention of mankind. Presumably it is not utterly point-
 less or absurd. Are its contents fiction, or false fact, or true
 fact? This at least is true, that it is crowded with matters of gen-
 uine fact such that every one must acknowledge them when he
 notices them. No person, ancient or modern, heathen or Chris-
 tian or agnostic, doubts that man is ultimately the product of the
 supreme powers of the universe, whether those powers are held
 to be God or natural law or chance or something else; and no one
 doubts that this fact is important enough to deserve a large place

in human thought. The account in Genesis gives due prominence to this fact, affirming in addition that the one personal God is the supreme power in the universe. Further, any scientist, Christian or agnostic or atheist, if he has in his make-up any appreciation of anything, feels the wonderfulness of the fact that the supreme powers have so constructed man—physically a few pounds of solid matter, mere dirt, dust of the earth, in combination with a few gallons of water—that man is also a thinking, feeling individual person. This immense fact looms up large in Genesis. Other facts of the same order are that the animals are the servants and comrades of man, having come into contact with him, and been named by him; that there is one companionship, that between man and wife, such that no other is like it; that the universe is an orderly structure; that the need of sabbath rest is an inwoven part of it. These and the like of these are the facts which the authors of Genesis had in mind to present to their readers. The validity of these facts is indubitable. And they are facts perennially interesting to the human mind, and when these authors treated them they had not, as now, become commonplace through repeated handling.

And we, we have ignored what are really the facts in these narratives, and have mistaken figures of speech for facts. We have here carried to excess our human habit of giving deteriorated meanings to statements that have become familiar. This habit is by no means confined to our treatment of the bible. Early in the nineteenth century the term "total abstinence" was coined, to denote abstinence from wine and beer as a common drink, as well as from distilled liquors. To-day, I believe, a total abstainer is understood to be one who will not take a sip of alcoholic wine at the communion, or neutralize a rattlesnake bite with whisky. There is humor in the saying, "All signs of rain fail in dry weather," but I have oftener met the saying in the shape of the wooden bit of misinformation that "all signs fail in dry weather." Some person with a poet's soul in him, appreciating some of the fine lessons of poverty, uttered the proverb, "The nearer the bone the sweeter the meat." The proverb possesses vitality, and has survived. But we often hear it quoted as if it were not a proverb at all, but a sober physical fact.

Now if I should profess that these proverbs are true, and should yet deny that the sweetness of meat depends on bony con-

“Explaining Away” tact, or the relation of sign and thing signified on the humidity of the atmosphere, or if I should affirm that one may honestly take the old fashioned total abstinence pledge, and yet eat vanilla ice cream, I suppose that some one might accuse me of “explaining away” the meaning of these proverbs or of total abstinence. And when I repudiate the wooden meanings that a mechanical tradition has placed on parts of the bible, and call attention to the true meaning, I expect to be accused of explaining away. It is not a process of explaining away, in either case; it is simply the scouring off of the accumulated verdigris, enabling one to see again the true color of the metal.

Some tens of millions of children have been taught a catechism which has such questions and answers as these:

“Who made you? God.

Of what were you made? Of dust.”

Those who use this catechism are perfectly aware that children are born, and that a child of catechism age is the product of heredity and nutrition and educating influences. If we do not attribute to them the idea that God is a sort of big baby girl making mud pies in the shape of children, why should we find that idea in the similar language in the book of Genesis?

Similar statements might be made concerning other biblical narratives. It is strange that we should read these narratives, and

The Deteriorated Meaning Not Original discover the fine meanings in them, and yet imagine that what the author intended is the mud pie meaning that presents itself to the mind of a baby.

In such cases the finer meaning is the original meaning, and the wooden meaning is a deterioration. And the finer meaning excludes the mud pie meaning, proving it to be a degradation of the sense, the result of unappreciative reading. If the degraded meaning were the one originally intended by the author, how could we account for the presence of the other? Here as in other literature we must regard the fine meaning as original, and must credit the author with poetic gift.

In the case of a multitude of the biblical narratives we shall find that when we take their literary character into the account,

The Facts Credible when we Really Find Them and perceive the real nature of the facts they contain, we shall have no further trouble concerning their historicity. We shall rather find ourselves asking the question: Could any one possibly state these facts, in

the perennial and universal aspects of them, more exquisitely than they are stated in the bible?

II. From this consideration of literary character, in its bearings on the question of factual truth, we turn to the task of stating a doctrine as to the historicity of the scriptures. Let it take the form of three brief propositions.

First, we may distinguish fiction from fact in the scriptures on the same principles as in other writings.

Second, statements of fact in the scriptures are to be provisionally received as true, except as sufficient reasons appear to the contrary.

Third, as a matter of actual result, the thorough application of these two laws will lead to a conviction that the Old and New Testaments are remarkably truthful in their statements of fact.

Let us study briefly these three propositions.

1. In the first place, we may distinguish fiction from fact in the scriptures on the same principles as in other writings.

a. The question of their correctness in the statements of fact they make is different from the question whether there is in them a larger element of fiction—fiction used for purposes of religious teaching—than we have been accustomed to suppose. It is possible to accept the existence of this larger element of fiction without ceasing to hold to a very strict doctrine of divine revelation and inspiration, and without conceding that the scriptures are untrue to fact. *One who believes that Jesus taught by parables is precluded from denying that the writers of the Old and New Testaments may also teach by parables.* In its own proper character fiction may be as true as any statement of fact.

The bible does not abound in that form of fiction known as fable. But the fable of Jotham the son of Gideon concerning the bramble that was made king over the trees (Jud. ix. 7—21), and that of Jehoash king of Israel concerning the thistle of Lebanon that proposed marriage alliance with the cedar (2 Ki. xiv. 9—10), are admirable specimens of their kind.

More abundant are the detached or detachable stories which are capable of being regarded as religious parables—the story of Jonah, for example, or that of Esther, or the wonderful stories in the book of Daniel. In this paper I am careful not to say whether these stories are fact

Fiction Con-
sistent with
Truthfulness

Fable

Detach-
able
Stories

or fiction. But if one person holds that they are accounts of actual events, and another holds that they are religious fiction written for didactic purposes, the two may yet find in them exactly the same spiritual truths and lessons. The utmost freedom in the recognition of such instances of fiction is consistent with the strongest affirmation of the truthfulness of the scriptures.

To affirm that these stories are fiction, let us remember, is as different as possible from affirming that they are false fact. Fiction not only differs from false fact, but the hypothesis of fiction excludes that of false fact. It is one of the curiosities of adverse criticism that we sometimes find a biblical story condemned for being a fiction, never intended to teach historical fact, and afterward find the parts of it condemned in detail for not teaching historical facts correctly. That is as when the prosecutor charged the accused with having killed his unprepared victim instantly by months of lingering torture. If either friend or foe says that a passage is fiction, that precludes his treating it as if it were false fact.

To take further instances, it is supposable that one might regard certain entire books as works of fiction, and yet regard the scriptures as true in all the statements of fact they make. When men tell us that the book of Job is a poem, a work of the imagination; or that Daniel is a religious romance; or that Deuteronomy is a fictitious setting for the Mosaic laws; we may or may not accept their theory, but their theory does not necessarily attribute falshood to the bible.

Still less is the opinion that some of the ostensibly biographical elements in the narratives may really be accounts of tribes rather than of persons, having to this extent the nature of fiction or of figure of speech, necessarily inconsistent with the opinion that the narratives are true to fact.

Even a more extreme supposition is possible. It is supposable that one may recognize a mythical element woven into some of the historical narratives, and yet leave the statements of fact in the narratives unassailed. This is a more puzzling case than the preceding ones, on account of the difficulty of dissecting between the two, if we admit the mingling of fact and fiction in the same narrative. But myth and legend are respectable forms of fiction. There is no reason why they should not be used for purposes of religious

Fiction Ex-
clusive of
False Fact

Whole
Books as
Fictions

Ethnical
Biography

Myth and
Legend

teaching. Suppose, for example, that a pentateuchal writer, in examining his materials on the subject of the manna, found among them certain legends of rare pith and power for inculcating lessons concerning divine providence; are you sure that he ought not to incorporate parts of the legendary matter into his narrative? Supposably one might think that the author has done this, and yet not swerve from the opinion that the narratives are historically correct.

In saying these things I am expressing no opinion as to the extent to which fiction, in its various forms, actually exists among the scriptures; I am only affirming that its presence, even in large measure, is not inconsistent with their truthfulness. Incidentally we should note that the recognition of a fictional element is apologetically convenient. Troublesome matters may be very summarily disposed of by the hypothesis that they are not fact, but fiction. This convenience is so tempting that we perhaps need to remind ourselves that nothing except its actual existence there can ever justify our finding fiction in the bible.

b. But how shall we distinguish between fiction and statements of fact? It is not easy to say with exactness. There is room here for only a hint or two. If, for example, statements are incredible when taken as statements of fact, that may indicate that their author intended them as fiction; but this mark is not necessarily decisive, for the statements may be simply untrue. An account of a miracle is not necessarily a fiction, for the narrator may have thought that the miracle really occurred. It still remains true that most people think that miracles have occurred. Grotesqueness is often though not always a mark of fiction. Ancient fiction is likely to be marked by a certain conventionalized symmetry, like a conventionalized leaf or other object in drawing or sculpture. The silence of profane history concerning Esther and Mordecai is the strongest existing reason for regarding the book of Esther as fiction. The strongest reason in the case of the book of Job is the fact that the persons of the book address one another in poetry.

Practically the most effective test is that which consists in gaining a thorough mastery of the meaning of a writing. We get at the meaning of a fictitious narrative by precisely the same processes as if it were a narrative of facts. By dealing with a passage as matters of fact ought to be dealt with until we thoroughly

understand its contents, we apply the best criterion for determining whether it is fact or fiction.

It is not necessary in all cases to settle the question whether a passage is fact or fiction. Commonly we can understand the contents of a passage, and learn its important lessons without settling this question. Here as elsewhere it is better to leave a question open than to settle it without evidence. A hypothesis that a narrative may be fiction is better than a muddled claim that it deals with actual events.

2. We turn to the second proposition in our doctrine of biblical historicity. In the absence of proof to the contrary, statements of fact are to be provisionally accepted as true.

Certainly this is not an extravagant claim of truthfulness for the bible. I am not demanding, at the outset, a blind confidence in everything the bible says. I am not advocating credulity. One of you would not feel very highly complimented at having it said that any statement you make is to be provisionally believed except as reasons appear to the contrary; though in certain circumstances you would recognize your obligation to submit to the rule.

If a statement is inherently incredible, or is self-contradictory, or is in conflict with known facts, or is otherwise disproved, this rule does not require one to accept the statement. And if there is no reason against it the rule only requires one to accept it provisionally, recognizing the possibility that discrediting reasons may yet become known. All that the rule asks is that a statement shall not be rejected without one's first taking the trouble to understand it and its claims to acceptance.

This rule is applicable in all investigation based on testimony. In any court the word of a witness is to be provisionally accepted unless there is reason to the contrary. It would be so with a respectable witness, and it would be so with a jailbird or a noted liar. A witness has his direct examination, is permitted to tell his story, before he is cross-examined, or his testimony declared false. Among fair-minded people the courts never permit an action to begin by cross-examining the witness. Trials have sometimes been conducted on the principle of discrediting the witnesses before hearing them, but the world remembers such trials as infamous. Surely, the witnesses who testify in the scriptures are not worthy of less credence than a convict in a court of justice!

The same rule would apply in any civic matter in which you were seeking information, or in any scientific investigation. In all cases you recognize the fact that the witness may be prejudiced or incompetent. You reject particular statements, if they seem to you incredible. When you come to understand the whole story you may disbelieve the whole or parts of it. But, if you are fair-minded, you do not reject statements before you give them attention.

In a certain way this rule applies to all biblical statements whether of fact or of fiction; for, as we have seen, we discover that a passage is fiction by treating it as if it were fact. Provisionally accept as true the statements you find, unless they bear marks of untruth, and you are on your way to a true understanding of the passage, no matter what the character of it may be.

Two reprehensible practices in contravention of the rule are very common, the practice of substituting a traditional interpretation for a biblical statement of fact, and the practice of needlessly rejecting the biblical statements.

The first of these two practices abounds among both conservatives and moderns. I have already mentioned some instances, when speaking of the unliterary understanding of the bible that is so common. But most persons have no idea of the wideness of the divergence between what the scriptures say and what they are commonly supposed to say. Our traditions have heaped bundles of divers sorts upon the cart that is drawn by the authors of the bible. For example, Auntie told these stories to us when we were little. Auntie loves to see the baby eyes grow round with wonder. If she modifies the story, it is not in a way that will lessen the roundness of the eyes. Many other influences contribute to the result, and we acquire a knowledge of biblical events that is as distinct as it is babyish and inadequate. And then, in our studies in later life, we take a Babylonian inscribed tablet and spend weeks upon it; we seek to improve our texts by scanning old manuscripts with a finely critical eye; we take marvelous pains to be correct in the matter of Hebrew and Greek particles and syntax; but when it comes to considering the contents of the biblical narratives, we take it for granted that we have known all that ever since we can remember.

I should be sorry to be understood as speaking disrespectfully

of bible instruction for children. There is no nobler or more useful ministration on earth than that in which a sweet and godly woman familiarizes a little child with the stories in the bible. Its value is diminished by reason of our current misunderstanding of the stories, but a measureless value remains. The trouble is not that Auntie taught John the stories when John was a little boy; it is that John was content to remain a big baby in his biblical ideas after he had become an adult in his other thinking.

I venture the assertion that three-fourths of the difficulties which candid men find with the biblical history are based on misapprehensions as to what the bible says. They would be forestalled if one would really examine the statements of fact made in the bible, instead of taking it for granted that they mean something which they do not mean.

The other reprehensible habit in violation of our rule is that of needlessly rejecting biblical statements of fact. In recent books some thousands of instances are cited of alleged contradictions in the scriptures. Many of the instances are brought up three times: first, in proof that the testimony of the text cannot be depended upon; second, in proof that the account was written long after the events; third, in proof that it was made up by piecing together earlier inconsistent accounts. But if you will take up these cases one by one, according to them the same fair treatment that you would demand for statements made by yourself, you will decide that in nine-tenths of them there is clearly no contradiction, and that only a small proportion of the remaining tenth present any real difficulty. In hundreds of other places the biblical statements are alleged to be inherently incredible. This list will be very small after you have eliminated all accounts of miracles, and all instances in which the allegation of incredibility is itself a blunder. Or again, if the biblical account disagrees with some statement found in secular history, or even with some inference from such a statement, men make haste to say that it is surely the biblical statement that is false. And if the testimony does not sustain a man's theory, he counts it for nothing, even if he has no charges of contradiction or improbability or adverse evidence to allege against it.

The habit of dealing thus with the testimony found in the bible is the one crying vice of much of the scholarship of our times. For it is largely a matter of habit and of reasonless aping of a

Illegal Rejection
of Testimony

This Paper
a Protest

fashion. These wholesale charges of falsity would not be made except as the result of a habit—the habit of regarding biblical testimony as of little account in itself, of regarding the biblical witnesses as guilty until some one proves them innocent. This practice is common in the works that present the Modern View, but it is not confined to them. It is in protest against such unscientific and unjust practices, wherever they may be found, that this paper has been prepared.

3. The third proposition in our doctrine of historicity is that the actual result of following the law in the first two propositions will be a conviction that the Old and New Testaments are remarkably truthful in their statements of fact. That is to say, if one intelligently distinguishes between fact and fiction in the bible, and then provisionally believes such statements of fact as he has no reason for disbelieving, he will become more and more convinced that these witnesses tell the truth, so that their statements may be thoroughly depended upon.

The proof of this proposition by argument might be expanded into an encyclopædia. For that reason I have stated it as a matter to be proved by experiment, rather than by argument. Try it. Give the biblical writings sufficient attention so that you understand from themselves what they affirm, and see if they do not command your credence. They only need fair play in order to be self-evidencing.

I have purposely made this proposition elastic. If a thousand persons should try this experiment in concert, I do not think they would all agree as to which elements are to be regarded as fiction. I do not think they would agree as to which particular statements, if any, are to be thrown out as incredible. Still less do I think that they would reach exactly the same result concerning the degree of credibility belonging to the scriptures as a whole. But I think that few or none of them would fail to be convinced of the existence of a degree of credibility that is very high.

This proposition that the scriptures are remarkably true to fact differs from the doctrine of miraculous inerrancy that has sometimes been taught. It does not affirm that every particular statement is invariably correct. In other writings we recognize mistakes of inadvertence which do not materially lessen our confidence in the good faith

To be Proved
by Experiment

The Proposi-
tion Elastic

Inerrancy

and competence of the witness. If there are some such errors in the bible, even in matters of some importance, that does not necessarily invalidate the claim that the biblical statements of fact are thoroughly to be believed.

It is true, however, that one who begins by not rejecting biblical statements without reason is likely to end by finding in them a degree of credibility not unlike that ascribed to them in the formulas of the doctrine of inerrancy.

Our proposition applies to the statements of fact which the scriptures actually make, not to those which somebody or other thinks that they make. Earlier in this paper we have had occasion to notice that there is in some cases a very great difference between these two things. The fact will bear reiteration.

In the doctrine as thus taught, no supreme importance attaches to the difference between existing copies and autographs, between fairly good copies and perfect copies. Of course it is true that copyists have made mistakes, and that translators have made mistakes. When the original writers of the scriptures used earlier documents, they may have copied errors without indorsing them. It is highly important to use these phenomena in accounting for errors that may be found, thus diminishing the number fairly chargeable against the proper scriptures. But the propositions in hand do not depend upon this. They apply directly to any fairly good copy in any language.

But why insist upon these things? Why regard them as important? Why still contend against opinions which many regard as having already displaced the older doctrines of Christendom? Why stand out against that which is proclaimed to be a foregone conclusion?

Simply because nothing is ever settled until it is settled right.

The doctrine that the bible is a progressive revelation is sometimes set forth as a reason for attaching relatively slight importance to the question whether it is truthful in matters of fact. This assumes that the bible is a revelation, and it must be dealt with from that point of view. Of course revelation is progressive. That is one of the glories of it. No one can too strongly affirm the progressive character of revelation. But it does not follow that revelation is incorrect in its statements of fact. What possible nexus is there

True only of
Scripture
Statements

Autographs
versus Other
Copies

A Progressive
Revelation

between these two things? There may be a false theory of progressive revelation, as well as a true idea. And any theory is certainly false if it carries the implication that God used to tell lies to men, and only later told them the truth.

But, this evening, we are not discussing revelation and inspiration; we are on the lower levels occupied by mere questions of

Unscientific Procedure history. And on this lower plane, the one great objection to the easy setting aside of scriptural statements of fact is that this procedure is un-

scientific. In these days we are often reminded that it is unscientific to start with the assumption that the statements of the bible are miraculously inerrant. So it is. But it is exactly as unscientific to start with the assumption that these statements are generally untrustworthy. The statements themselves are facts, and are to be accounted for. Their being true is a supposable way of accounting for them. To begin by excluding this is as outrageously unscientific as anything that can be imagined. Or, to repeat this in terms of common life, it is horrible injustice to brand the biblical witnesses as liars or incompetents, without first taking the trouble to understand and test what they say.

It is claimed that our generation is affected with a "passion for reality," an unquenchable hungering to find out what is true,

The Passion for Reality even at the cost of being compelled to discard what is sacred. And it is right to say that nothing is too sacred to be discarded, provided it is

untrue. But that is not a genuine passion for reality which leads one to slight true sources of information. Real hunger for truth takes the opposite course.

From the plane of historical study, this is the one reason for not treating with contempt the biblical statements of fact. So to treat them is unscientific. It is inconsistent with the passion for truth, with the hunger for reality. This is directly the only reason. But there are other reasons that show the importance of the matter, its claim upon our attention, the folly of our allowing it to go by default.

The groundless ignoring of the biblical testimony is bad educationally, as well as scientifically. It is revolting to true literary instincts. The habit of finding inconsistencies and absurdities where there are none, and

Bad as Discipline of refusing to admit valid evidence, is a habit harmful to the mind. It blunts the powers of discernment. It

calls attention away from the things that are really worth attending to.

It is sometimes affirmed, as a reason for not insisting on the historicity of the scriptures, that their principle value lies in their spiritual teachings, and not in their statements of fact. The affirmation is true. We should be as far as possible from ignoring it. But it does not justify the inference that the scriptures are untrue when they state facts, nor the inference that their factual truthfulness is unimportant. If we regard them as unreliable in earthly things, where we can test them, that will not confirm our confidence in them in higher matters. Moreover, their spiritual teachings are to a large extent matters of fact. Immortality is a fact, if it is anything. The incarnation is a fact, or it is nothing. The influences of the Spirit of God are matters of fact. Is it possible to concede that the witness of the scriptures to fact is of uncertain value, and yet to be confident that these great facts are the eternal verities that we have been wont to consider them? Certain men in Europe and America have recently published definitions of Christianity in which personal immortality and heaven and the Holy Ghost and the person of Christ are relegated to the domain of uncertain speculation. These men have simply traveled in a straight road, after having started with the denial of the factual truthfulness of the scriptures; but if they are mistaken, their mistake is a dismal one.

Many scholars profess that their adoption of the Modern View, including its doctrine of the unhistoricity of the scriptures, has given them a better appreciation of the bible, and a truer reverence for it. I have no doubt of their sincerity. Their experience amounts simply to this, that much study of the bible has made them more intelligent in it than they themselves previously were. I think that none of them will say specifically that the experience is due to their easy discrediting of scriptural statements. And Christendom is full of men who have had the opposite experience of thoroughly losing their reverence for the bible. How could it be otherwise? If you find that any acquaintance is in the habit of making assertions that he does not know to be true, can you help feeling less respect for him?

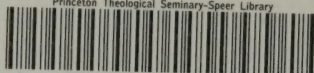
Not unfrequently men emphasize the peerless personality of Jesus as the one great thing, with the suggestion that such minor

matters as the truthfulness of the scriptures to fact are of no importance. And indeed, the peerless personality of Jesus is the great thing. Details are minor matters compared with it. But it is a case in which you cannot separate the great thing from the minor matters.

The Peerless Personality of Jesus
What we know concerning the peerless personality of Jesus we have learned from the gospels, and from them as interpreted by the rest of the New and Old Testaments. Unless these writings are true to fact, we have no trustworthy knowledge of the peerless personality of Jesus. Further, if there is any fact which we know about Jesus it is that he, and his disciples following him, persistently affirmed the Old Testament scriptures, and based their teachings thereon. If you get to believing that Jesus was in the habit of making assertions that he did not know to be true, where for you is the peerless personality of Jesus? To cite the *kenosis* is no reply to this, for the peerless personality existed during the *kenosis* if it existed at all.

Conclusion
There is a doctrine of the truthfulness of the scriptures that will surely be recognized by all who do not begin by assuming their untruthfulness. The doctrine of the future will concern itself with actual copies as well as with supposable autographs. It will recognize the progressive character and the spiritual purpose of the Book, and the sole supremacy of the one living and true God. It will emphasize the search for true meanings, in place of the otiose acceptance of meanings that are familiar. It will not affirm a mechanical, inflexible inerrancy that ignores the human element. It will be hospitable to some difference of opinion in the matter of correctness in details. But it will affirm that the Old and New Testaments are not merely infallible for dogmatic purposes, not merely the record for ultimate appeal in matters of doctrine and practice, but are throughout truthful in their statements of fact. And in their truthfulness it will find a solid foundation for its doctrine of Inspiration and Divine Authority.

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